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Thirty Tyrants Rule Athens for Eight Months

David B. Hollander

Iowa State University, dbh8@iastate.edu

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Thirty Tyrants Rule Athens for Eight Months

Abstract

Following its defeat in the Peloponnesian War, Athens was ruled by thirty oligarchic, pro-Spartan tyrants, whose despotic behavior quickly led to civil war and the restoration of the democracy.

Keywords

Government and politics, Wars, Uprisings, Civil unrest

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Civic and Community Engagement | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Military History | Peace and Conflict Studies | Politics and Social Change

Comments

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government, religion, political and economic groups, family structure, and typical occupations.

Lloyd, Michael. *The Agon in Euripides*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1992. A study of the *agon*, or formal debate, a technique used in Euripides' tragedies in which two characters confront each other, often before an arbitrator or judge, and make long speeches as if they were opponents in a court of law. Lloyd believes the *agon* is often of crucial importance to the central conflict of the play.

Morford, Mark P. O., et al. *Classical Mythology*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001. An excellent introduction to the myths and legends of Greece and Rome. Contains useful illustrations.

Murray, Gilbert. *Euripides and His Age*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979. Classic study of Euripides. Reconstructs his life and times, the conventions of Greek tragedy, and how Euripides worked within them and liberated them.

Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin. *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993. The author argues that the prominence of female characters in Euripides' plays

suggests a structure of male dominance while simultaneously applauding the strength of women.

Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex Warner. Reprint. New York: Viking Press, 1954. Written four hundred years before the birth of Christ, this volume details contemporary accounts of the war between Athens and Sparta, which eventually plunged the entire Greek world into twenty-seven years of struggle.

SEE ALSO: c. 456/455 B.C.E., Greek Tragedian Aeschylus Dies; c. 440 B.C.E., Sophists Train the Greeks in Rhetoric and Politics; c. 438 B.C.E., Greek Lyric Poet Pindar Dies; May, 431-September, 404 B.C.E., Peloponnesian War; June, 415-September, 413 B.C.E., Athenian Invasion of Sicily; September, 404-May, 403 B.C.E., Thirty Tyrants Rule Athens for Eight Months; c. 385 B.C.E., Greek Playwright Aristophanes Dies.

RELATED ARTICLES in *Great Lives from History: The Ancient World*: Aeschylus; Anaxagoras; Aristophanes; Euripides; Menander (dramatist); Pindar; Protagoras; Thucydides.

September, 404-May, 403 B.C.E.

THIRTY TYRANTS RULE ATHENS FOR EIGHT MONTHS

Following its defeat in the Peloponnesian War, Athens was ruled by thirty oligarchic, pro-Spartan tyrants, whose despotic behavior quickly led to civil war and the restoration of the democracy.

LOCALE: Athens

CATEGORIES: Government and politics; wars, uprisings, and civil unrest

KEY FIGURES

Lysander of Sparta (d. 395 B.C.E.), Spartan general
Pausanias of Sparta (d. c. 385 B.C.E.), king of Sparta,
r. c. 408-c. 385 B.C.E.

Theramenes (d. 403 B.C.E.), Athenian politician
Critias of Athens (c. 460-403 B.C.E.), Athenian
politician

Thrasybulus (d. 388 B.C.E.), Athenian politician

SUMMARY OF EVENT

In 405 B.C.E., a Spartan fleet under the command of Lysander of Sparta won a devastating victory over the Athenians at Aegospotami. Having crippled Athenian naval

power, Lysander proceeded to blockade Athens by sea while the Spartan kings, Pausanias and Agis (r. c. 427-400), besieged the city by land. The threat of starvation forced the Athenians to capitulate the following year, finally bringing the Peloponnesian War (431-404) to an end. The Athenian politician Theramenes helped negotiate the surrender terms, which required the Athenians to become subordinate allies of Sparta, recall all exiles, limit their navy to twelve ships, give up most foreign territory, and dismantle both the harbor fortifications at Piraeus and the Long Wall connecting the port to the city of Athens 4 miles (6.5 kilometers) away.

In the summer of 404 B.C.E., the Thirty, a group of Athenian oligarchs, formed a new government at Athens, replacing the democracy. Chief among the Thirty were Critias of Athens and Theramenes. Critias, a relative of Plato and friend of Socrates, was a politician, philosopher, and playwright who had been exiled from Athens in 406. Like many upper-class Greeks, he greatly admired the aristocratic and authoritarian Spartan political system. Theramenes, though he had participated in two

short-lived oligarchic governments in 411, favored less extreme policies. It is unclear precisely how the Thirty came to power, but they were probably installed at the instigation of Lysander, who created similar puppet governments in other conquered cities. Apparently the Thirty were not meant to be a permanent ruling body but merely had a mandate to draw up a new constitution for the Athenians along more conservative lines.

The Thirty quickly consolidated power, establishing a council of five hundred, appointing magistrates, abolishing democratic laws and institutions, and providing themselves with a bodyguard. Under the leadership of Critias, they began to try to execute men who had acted as informers under the democracy. Soon the Thirty moved against pro-democratic leaders and potential rivals. They may even have been responsible for the assassination of the notorious politician and general Alcibiades of Athens (c. 450-404 B.C.E.), who had sought refuge with the Persians. Some were executed, and others were exiled. In Plato's *Apologia Sōkratous* (399-390 B.C.E.; *Apology*, 1675), Socrates claims to have defied the Thirty's order to help arrest one individual sentenced to death and thereby risked arrest and execution himself. According to Aristotle, the Thirty killed about fifteen hundred men during their short reign. Such practices soon caused these oligarchs to be known as the Thirty Tyrants.

At some point (the precise chronology is unclear), Theramenes began to question the policies of Critias. Favoring a more moderate and inclusive government, he opposed both the executions and Critias's scheme to limit the franchise to only three thousand Athenians. Backed by the other members of the Thirty, Critias had Theramenes put to death.

Having established a citizen body of three thousand, the Thirty proceeded to disarm all other Athenians and expel them from the city. Resident aliens, or *metics*, were soon threatened as well. Either because of their wealth or opposition to the regime, the Thirty executed a number of wealthy *metics* and confiscated their property. To discourage opposition and enforce their commands, at some point (again the precise chronology is unclear), the Thirty also requested and received a garrison of about seven hundred soldiers from Sparta.

Many Athenians fled the Thirty's reign of terror, seeking refuge in neighboring Greek city-states such as Argos, Megara, and Thebes. The Spartans responded by ordering their allies to surrender any Athenian exiles to the Thirty, but some states, increasingly disenchanted with Spartan hegemony, refused to do so. Thrasybulus, a staunchly pro-democratic Athenian politician and gen-

eral who had been banished by the Thirty, began to organize the refugees in Thebes.

During the winter of 404/403 B.C.E., Thrasybulus invaded Attica with a small group of men and occupied the fortress at Phyle, 12 miles (19 kilometers) north of Athens. The Thirty sent the Three Thousand to retake Phyle, but they were unable to dislodge the democrats. Buoyed by this initial success and strengthened by reinforcements, Thrasybulus now began to raid the surrounding countryside. The Thirty deployed the Spartan garrison and some Athenian cavalry to contain the pro-democratic forces. Thrasybulus responded by launching a dawn surprise attack on the Spartan camp. He won a major victory, inflicting many casualties and forcing the Spartans to flee.

Thrasybulus and his followers proceeded to march on Piraeus, where they took up a strong defensive position at Munichia, a steep hill on the outskirts of the port city. The Thirty, whose army still greatly outnumbered that of Thrasybulus, foolishly decided to attack. Thanks in part to his use of light-armed *peltasts* (javelin-throwers), Thrasybulus was able to defeat the oligarchs' army, killing more than seventy men. Of the Thirty, both Critias and Hippomachus died in the fighting.

The surviving oligarchs retreated with their army to the city of Athens, where the Three Thousand, increasingly unhappy with the leadership of the Thirty, deposed them and installed a new ruling council of ten. The Thirty and their remaining supporters withdrew to Eleusis, a city in Attica approximately 10 miles (16 kilometers) northwest of Athens. As a precaution, the Thirty had seized this town sometime earlier, expelling and executing its inhabitants.

Thrasybulus's support continued to grow, and the democrats soon threatened to take Athens itself. After both the Thirty at Eleusis and the Ten at Athens requested Spartan assistance, Lysander responded by lending the oligarchs money, sending a fleet to blockade Piraeus, and gathering an army at Eleusis. Pausanias, perhaps fearful of Lysander's growing power and reputation, soon arrived with another army. By the summer of 403 B.C.E., a combined force of Spartan and pro-oligarchic Athenian troops proceeded to attack the democrats at Piraeus. After a few inconclusive engagements, Pausanias managed to broker a new settlement between the various Athenian factions. Thrasybulus and his followers were allowed to return to Athens while the Thirty and their close associates would retain control of Eleusis. Those who had remained at Athens during the reign of the Thirty were allowed to choose whether they wanted to stay there or relocate to Eleusis. In early October of 403, Thrasybulus and his army entered Athens, and democratic govern-

ment was restored. The Athenians all swore to observe an amnesty and not punish anyone for his actions under the oligarchic regime.

Two years later in 401 B.C.E., the democrats, fearing renewed attacks from the Thirty, marched on Eleusis. At a parley, they surprised and killed the leaders of the oligarchs. The democrats then reached a peaceful settlement with the inhabitants of Eleusis, who once again became part of the Athenian polity.

SIGNIFICANCE

The reign of the Thirty Tyrants was significant for a number of reasons. Most famously, Socrates' close association with Critias and other oligarchs probably led to his trial and execution in 399 B.C.E. despite the amnesty agreement. The harsh policies of the Thirty helped make Thebes, which had called for the complete destruction of Athens in 404, sympathetic to Athenian democrats. The Thebans aided Thrasybulus and soon formed an alliance with Athens. Together they resisted Spartan imperialism during the Corinthian War (395-386). Thrasybulus's victories further tarnished Sparta's military reputation and demonstrated how effective light-armed troops could be against hoplites. Finally, Athens, unlike many other Greek city-states that suffered periods of civil strife, managed to avoid a debilitating cycle of revenge and retribution following the bloody reign of the Thirty. For the most part, the amnesty worked, and Athens was able to begin rebuilding its power.

—David B. Hollander

401-400 B.C.E.

MARCH OF THE TEN THOUSAND

The March of the Ten Thousand was a failed military expedition against Persia, but it confirmed the superiority of Greek hoplites over Asian infantry and revealed the growing importance of mercenaries in Greek warfare.

LOCALE: Western Persian Empire in Asia Minor (now Turkey, Syria, and Iraq)

CATEGORIES: Wars, uprisings, and civil unrest; expansion and land acquisition

KEY FIGURES

Xenophon (c. 431-c. 354 B.C.E.), Athenian officer, historian, and chronicler of the march

Cyrus the Younger (c. 424-401 B.C.E.), Persian prince and satrap in Asia Minor, brother of Artaxerxes II

FURTHER READING

Aristotle. *The Athenian Constitution: The Eudemian Ethics; On Virtues and Vices*. Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981. A history of Athenian political institutions from the archaic period down to the fourth century B.C.E.

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Krenz, Peter. *The Thirty at Athens*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982. A comprehensive modern study of the Thirty's reign. Bibliography and index.

Wolpert, Andrew. *Remembering Defeat: Civil War and Civic Memory in Ancient Athens*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. A discussion of the civil war and how Athenians coped with the memory of it. Bibliography and index.

Xenophon. *Hellenica*. New York: Arno Press, 1979. A history of Greece from 411 to 362 B.C.E. written by a contemporary Athenian.

SEE ALSO: 499-494 B.C.E., Ionian Revolt; 478-448 B.C.E., Athenian Empire Is Created; May, 431-September, 404 B.C.E., Peloponnesian War; June, 415-September, 413 B.C.E., Athenian Invasion of Sicily.

RELATED ARTICLES in *Great Lives from History: The Ancient World*: Pausanias of Sparta; Socrates; Xenophon.

Artaxerxes II (d. c. 359 B.C.E.), king of Persia, r. 405-359 B.C.E.

Tissaphernes (d. 395 B.C.E.), Persian satrap in Asia Minor, general at the Battle of Cunaxa

Clearchus (fl. fifth century B.C.E.), Spartan exile, chief commander of the Greek mercenaries

SUMMARY OF EVENT

The March of the Ten Thousand refers to the 1,500-mile (2,400-kilometer) journey of a Greek mercenary army into the heart of the Persian Empire, its valorous but vain combat near Babylon (now in central Iraq), and its arduous trek back to Greek territory more than a year later. The story is vividly recounted in the *Kurou anabasis* (between 394 and 371 B.C.E.; *Anabasis*, also known as